



TRANS(RE)LATIONS: LESBIAN AND FEMALE TO MALE TRANSSEXUAL ACCOUNTS OF IDENTITY

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Synopsis — The following article is founded in interview based social research conducted with an opportunistic sample of British and North American lesbians and female to male transsexuals (FTMs). The interviews were concerned with their accounts of experience and identity from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood. Located in relation to a current debate regarding similarity and difference between lesbians and FTMs, the article juxtaposes the identity accounts to facilitate a comparative analysis and suggests that processes of “othering” are utilised as a means through which similar life histories are differentially experienced and accounted for. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

A recent academic exchange on butch/FTM borders that concerns issues of similarity and difference between butch lesbians and female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) has been sustained primarily through a discussion of the tenability of maintaining categorical boundaries between each identity category.¹ Through queer theoretical and/or political approaches, some have suggested that the categorical boundaries are blurred, permeable and fluid (Halberstam 1994, 1996, 1998; Hale, 1998; Rubin, 1992). Others, holding the view that queer perspectives are inappropriate lenses through which to view transsexuals, have argued that such categorisations should be seen as discrete and specific, relating to individuals with particular and distinctive histories (Prosser, 1996, 1998, 1999). However, to date, the arguments put forward have been founded upon observation and personal experience (Rubin, 1992) and media/literary represen-

tations and autobiographical accounts (Halberstam, 1994, 1996, 1998; Hale, 1998; Prosser, 1998). Empirical social research has not been utilised within the debate, and no attention has been given to systematically comparing the experiential accounts given by butch lesbians and FTMs to explain their coming to awareness of their particular sexual and gender identities and/or to the ways in which members of each group differentiate themselves from the other.

The aim of this article, based in primary social research, is to bridge this gap and begin to extend and develop the debate by offering such a comparative analysis, with the purpose of illuminating the processes and articulations of identification and differentiation within and between each group. The accounts of experiences and interpretations of identity referred to and analysed in the article are drawn from semistructured interviews that I conducted with 6 lesbians and 12 FTMs.² Beginning by indicating the relevance of issues of similarity and difference to lesbians and FTMs and moving through the comparative analysis of the experiences of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood recounted during the interviews, the article concludes by showing how, through processes of “othering,” the lesbians and FTMs distinguished themselves from one another *even though* their experiences were shown to be more similar than different.

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SIMILARITY, DIFFERENCE, AND THE PROBLEM OF "MASCULINITY"

Holly Devor (1997) suggests that lesbian feminist conceptions of lesbianism as a form of woman identification, together with the increasing visibility of transsexuality, have constituted social ideas through which many FTMs have come to reject lesbian identities. From her research with FTMs in the USA, Devor found that:

Participants who lived part of their lives as lesbian women were thus often in the position of having been drawn to lesbian identities on the basis of older definitions of lesbians as women who wanted to be men. . . . When participants tried to measure themselves against the more woman-centered images promulgated by lesbian-feminists they found themselves lacking . . . when [they] compared themselves to both generalized and specific lesbian others, they were struck more by the contrasts than by the similarities. It therefore became apparent to these participants that they had more in common with straight men than with lesbian women. (Devor, 1997, p. 99)

However, lesbian authors concerned with lesbian masculinities have criticised this definition, suggesting that butch lesbians have, both historically and contemporarily, pushed the category "lesbian" beyond the interpretation of the "woman-identified-woman" (see Burana & Due, 1994; Halberstam, 1994, 1996, 1998; Pratt, 1995; Rubin, 1992). "Butch" is defined by Gayle Rubin (1992) as encompassing ". . . individuals with a broad range of investments in 'masculinity'" (p. 467), and, in view of this term, both she and others have called for the recognition that there are in fact many points of overlap in respect of the "masculinities" of those who identify themselves as lesbian or FTM (see also Halberstam, 1994, 1996, 1998). Such overlaps are evidenced in the broadest sense through FTMs' and lesbians' simultaneous recuperation of the same historical and contemporary masculine, female embodied figures. For example, Radclyffe Hall (1880–1943), Billy Tipton (c. 1915–1989), and Brandon Teena, tragically murdered in the United States in 1993, have each been claimed by both lesbians and FTMs as belonging to their histo-

ries and cultures (Cromwell, 1999; Hale, 1998; Newton, 1984; Prosser, 1998). In the present postmodernist and poststructuralist milieu such competing claims suggest a certain fuzziness and "queerness" of the boundaries between lesbian and FTM masculinities, which has resulted in issues of difference and similarity within and between the two categories becoming the subject of the recent academic exchange on the butch/FTM border.

However, in general, lesbians and FTMs have each tended to hold quite clear and "non-fuzzy" views about each others' identities. For example, FTMs have been portrayed by lesbians as misguided, unenlightened "women" who probably are "really" lesbians (Jeffreys, 1994; Raymond, 1979). Conversely, FTMs have depicted lesbians as essentially content with their birth gender, and have described them as primarily woman-identified women who celebrate their femaleness and womanhood in both themselves and other women. In such accounts, lesbians are not perceived to experience a disjuncture between sex, gender, and sexuality, and the "gender dysphoria," which is seen to be specific to the transsexual "condition" (see Hewitt & Warren, 1995; Rees, 1996; Thompson & Sewell, 1995).³ But how accurately does each group represent the other? And what purposes can these representations be said to serve? These are questions that the following analysis seeks to address.

THE RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Although none of the lesbian participants self-identified as butch, all could be accommodated into the broad definition of the term as outlined by Rubin (1992), that is, from mildly to strongly masculine in feeling and/or presentation. The FTM participants spanned the various stages of gender reassignment, although none had had phalloplasty to make a surgically constructed penis. They reflected the general FTM population, most of whom do not have phalloplasty due to high costs and the lack of satisfactory surgical techniques available (Nataf, 1996). All of the FTMs had either previously self-identified as a lesbian, or through their sexual relationships with women, had at one time been considered to be so by others. Through the interviews I invited the participants to recount their experiences from child-

hood through to adulthood, and their understandings of these experiences in relation to their identification as either lesbian or FTM. The material that follows is presented chronologically in order to facilitate comparative description and analysis. Quotations from the accounts of the participants are shown in italics.

EXPERIENCES OF CHILDHOOD GENDER IDENTITIES: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF "TOMBOYHOOD"

The Lesbians

The most commonly reported feature of the lesbian participants' childhood was their tomboy identity. This was described as not being "girl-like," and thus not fitting into society's expectations/demands of how a girl should be. As an experience it involved "being one of the boys," doing what was/is considered to be "boys' activities," desiring what was/is considered to be "boys' things," and resisting pressures to act and present themselves as girls. This is exemplified in Ruth's account:

I was totally a tom-boy . . . my mother had a major struggle getting me to wear skirts and dresses, I spent my whole life in jeans and trousers. I spent most of my time sort of playing in the back alleys with the boys, playing things like conkers and chasing around on my bike with the lads and I kind of loved it. I thought of myself as one of the lads . . .

For all of the lesbians, social and/or parental pressure to conform to "girliness" had been experienced throughout their childhood. The most common pressure concerned the wearing of dresses and skirts, which none had wanted to wear, but which they had been required to wear for school and at times of family celebration. Wearing such clothes had generated feelings of awkwardness, powerlessness, embarrassment, and a general sense of false self-presentation. As described by Anne:

I felt stupid in a dress . . . it stopped me from being who I was whereas when I wore trousers I felt like I could be me. People treated me like a girl when I wore a dress and I hated it . . .

Whilst being required to conform to the norms of female dress and behaviour caused a

sense of erasure of self identity and undesired responses in others, those lesbians who reported that they were regularly perceived as boys found this to be equally disconcerting. Susan and Anne recalled a conscious desire to be boys and, although they found some pleasure in being perceived as such, they also experienced feelings of *shame* and *embarrassment*. Anne, for example, recounted her experience at the age of 10 of going shopping for her mother and the shop keeper addressing her as 'son'. At first his mistake generated a feeling in her of intense excitement and pleasure, although this quickly turned into shame as she began to feel uncomfortable in her feeling that "*his mistake was something that should not happen*". In not being seen as the girl she knew she was, but as something she was not, and could not be, she became aware and ashamed of her failure to fulfill either gender role:

. . . he had seen me as someone I wanted to be rather than who I really was and I felt a sense of a dark feeling, a feeling that I was wrong . . . I felt ashamed that I hadn't been seen as a girl as I knew I was one . . . it was my fault, I couldn't be a girl or a boy . . .

Similar feelings were recalled by Susan, who remembered that she had not been too distraught when, after falling off her bike during her paper round, a passer-by asked "*Are you all right, lad?*," but that she had been after a particular incident at school. Susan had been chased around the playground by a girl who, having caught her and kissed her on the cheek, then ran away shouting "*Susan is a boy! Susan is a boy!*" For Susan, this was a sharp reminder of her outsidership and generated feelings of embarrassment and shame as though she wanted to be a boy she knew that she was not one. Natalie and Lynn had both wanted to do "boys' things" but did not feel a similar desire to be boys. For them, being perceived as a boy produced not so much a sense of shame but of confusion. Natalie and Lynn were regularly told by family and friends that they looked like and should have been boys and both had felt confused by the disjuncture between their own inner sense of "self" and how they were perceived and seen by others. As a result, like Anne and Susan, they too had felt themselves to occupy a place of "outsiderness" to both genders. As Natalie commented: *I actually*

found it really hard. In a sense, I wasn't a boy but I wasn't a girl, so what was I?

For the lesbians, being a tom-boy was an emotional, presentational, and behavioural expression of being unable, and/or unwilling, to fit into the category of either "girl" or "boy." Each could not/would not, in the words of Judith Butler (1993) "... inhabit the ideal [they were] compelled to approximate" (p. 231), experiencing therefore, a disjuncture between sex and gender. This disjuncture was interpreted by all of them as evidence of their lesbianism.⁴

The FTMs

Each of the FTM participants also reported that they had been tom-boys during their childhood and, as with the lesbians, all considered themselves as having been, or as having wanted to be, one of the boys. Each held the view that they had neither been nor felt "girl-like" and considered that "tom-boyiness" constituted the expression of the way they did not fit into society's expectations of what a girl should be. However, despite the equivalence of their experiences to those of the lesbians, the meaning of "tom-boyiness" was differently interpreted. For all of the FTMs, having been a tom-boy was judged to be an early indicator of their transsexualism, as exemplified in the following extracts from the conversations with Carl and Nigel. Carl remarked:

I played with GI Joes and dressed in uniforms for play from when I was about seven. It was bloody screaming fights to get me into a dress, because I couldn't stand wearing them. I don't think that I thought about it much that it was odd to play with Tonka trucks and popguns. My folks were not apparently into hard stereotyping on the toy front, and I never had a reason to think that other folks might not find this usual.

For Carl, the childhood experience of not fitting into or wanting to fit into the conventional expectations of "girlness" is considered with hindsight to have been an oddity. He later perceived his desire for "boys' things" to indicate his inherent "boyiness" because had he been really a girl, he would have wanted "girls' things." For Carl, there is assumed to be an inherent gender difference that should, in childhood, manifest itself through conformity to conventional gendered expectations. Based in

similar experiences to those of both Carl and the lesbians, Nigel made an explicit connection between his tomboyhood and his embodiment:

At that age I did not know what was wrong. I just knew things were not right. I later realised that I was in the wrong body for everything I felt, enjoyed and thought.

Although it has been suggested that this is an oversimplistic description of the experiences of most transsexuals (Nataf, 1996), Nigel and 10 of the other respondents were insistent that this was indeed how they experienced themselves, particularly at the onset of puberty. Out of all the FTM participants, it was only Simon who considered that the phrase did not reflect his experience:

I did not feel "trapped" within my body so much as I felt trapped by the expectations that accompany the body which I occupied.

ADOLESCENCE AND PUBERTY: GENDER IDENTITIES AND THE BODY

The Lesbians

Simon's feeling of being "*trapped by the expectations that accompany the body [being] occupied*" was similarly echoed by the lesbian participants. The beginning of menstruation and other bodily changes, such as the growth of breasts and pubic hair, had been recognised as confirmation that they were growing into "women," and these changes had negative impacts upon their sense of self. For the most part, puberty had been experienced as unwanted and traumatic. "Becoming women" had generated feelings of horror, resentment, and fear and they had been embarrassed by, and ashamed of, those bodily changes which did not fit the sense of who they felt themselves to be. Natalie found that she had *got this body that people were sexualising that didn't feel like that to me*, and she *couldn't cope with the attentions that [the changes in her body] brought from men*. Similarly, Susan had felt uncomfortable with, and ashamed of, this *new woman's body*, which had become *somehow sexualised*. She felt that she had to hide her breasts and thus avoided any activity such as swimming, which meant that her body would be revealed, continuing in this way until she entered her late 20s. For both Natalie and Su-

san, puberty meant a loss of freedom and self-confidence: their changing bodies suggested to them that they could no longer be active tom-boys, and they could not identify themselves within, or accept, the social meanings and expectations inscribed upon their "woman's body."

Anne had been horrified at the changes she observed in her body at the onset of puberty, knowing that this meant a transformation into "womanhood," a state that she consciously did not want to attain. She recalled associating "womanhood" with *weakness, dependency, passivity* and the extremes of conventional femininity in her childhood, and that she could not identify herself within this characterisation. In rejecting this model of "woman," she rejected her changing body. For example, the growth of her breasts had been particularly disturbing, but, rather than simply covering them as Susan did, she consciously "*flattened*" them by wearing a child's "*petticoat*," which was too small for her, beneath her clothes. For Anne:

The whole experience of puberty was horrible . . . I hated having to be a girl and I certainly didn't want to be a woman. I remember laying in bed looking down at my body and I could see my breasts growing and pubic hair and I just cried . . . this wasn't me. I didn't think that I should have a penis or anything, just that I shouldn't have this new woman's body. I realised that they [boys] were kind of seeing me as a woman and so I couldn't be with them any more . . . but I couldn't be with the girls either. I remember thinking where can I go now? I had to fit in somewhere . . .

For Anne, changes in her body, and the accompanying changes in others' reactions to her, had brought to her attention not only that her body was being sexualised but that she was being seen as a "woman." She did not want to lose her "tom-boyhood," and felt that "womanhood" was robbing her of her identity. Anne considered that such an experience exemplified her difference as a lesbian from heterosexual women, whom she imagined would not share her experiences. For Anne, that she . . . *didn't think [she] should have a penis or anything* exemplified to her that her horror at her changing body was a specifically lesbian response, rather than an indication of a desire to be a man.

All the lesbians shared the view that during puberty, "womanhood" did not fully encom-

pass their self-identities. They all considered that they had felt a sense of difference from their female peers, during adolescence as well as in childhood, and considered this in retrospect to be further indicative of their later lesbian identification. As Ruth remarked:

The thing [about becoming a woman] was that I never did want to wear dresses or skirts and that just carried on. I never particularly wanted to look feminine and I was very conscious of that, very conscious of being different to other girls, they seemed quite happy wearing flowery dresses and so on and I never wanted to do that.

For the lesbians, puberty was experienced as traumatic, involving complex and reflexive relationships between changing embodiment and social responses to it. Retrospectively, this aversion to their sexualised bodies and their rejection of conventional heterosexual womanhood was universally identified as signifying their lesbian identities. Lesbian identification, then, represented a "third option"—a space between womanhood and manhood.

The FTMs

Although none of the FTM participants considered that they had been conventional girls in their childhood, it was not until puberty that most began to be more conscious of their feelings of gender difference. Each of the FTMs reported identical responses to the lesbians with regard to the physical changes in their bodies, seeing these as unwanted, embarrassing and disturbing. As described by Lee:

The entire experience of puberty was extremely traumatic. I hated the body. Breast development was horrific, embarrassing, humiliating and uncomfortable. I was quite large, 36C, but would not wear a suitable, supporting bra . . . but instead wore one . . . that had a "flattening" effect. Attention to my figure was feared, avoided, I was painfully self-conscious, and felt like I was in drag when persuaded/obliged to dress in female clothes . . .

Seeking to mask the developing/developed breasts and to avoid others' recognition of the female body echoes Anne's and Susan's behaviour. Russell too showed a similarity to the lesbians when he recalled his reaction to the start

of menstruation and the recognition of his new and “alien” womanhood:

when I started my first period my mum told my dad and my dad bought me a bunch of roses the next day and congratulated me on becoming a woman. I was very upset by it, I was really rude to him . . .

Such similarities in experience suggest, then, that alienation from the developing female body, seen by these FTMs and others as a signifier of their “gender dysphoria,” is not wholly specific to those individuals who come to identify themselves as transsexual. Indeed, for 9 out of the 12 FTMs, the feeling of “not fitting” the conventional model of womanhood during puberty and adolescence was understood by them in the first instance to be explainable in terms of lesbian identity. As Russell remarked:

When I came out and started going out with women, I thought, you know, this is it, so there was the euphoria of coming out to yourself and like, you know, finally sorting it . . . I wasn't mature enough to figure [being a transsexual] out and I wasn't sure at first because I didn't really see myself as wanting a dick, I just wanted to grow up to be a man, if you know what I mean.

That he didn't really see himself as *wanting a dick* suggested to Russell, as it had to Anne, that he must be a lesbian. Of the FTMs, only Martin, Ian and Lee had not considered their gender confusion during puberty to be an indicator of lesbianism. However, Martin had self-identified for a short period as bisexual, and Ian and Lee had experienced relationships with girls through which they had been considered by others to be lesbian. Thus, for all the FTMs, the rejection of conventional womanhood and aversion to female embodiment led to the ownership or attribution of a lesbian identity, which then became significant in the further development of their transsexual identity.

ADULTHOOD: EXPERIENCE, IDENTITY AND INTERPRETATION

The FTMs: Masculinity and Lesbian Experiences

Most of the FTMs considered that the period during which they had experienced sexual relationships with lesbian women had been

crucial to their later identification as FTM. Simon, Russell and Carl reported that, initially, being a lesbian was felt to be “*the answer*” to their emotional and social experiences of being unable to fit into the conventional woman's role, and that it seemed for them at the time, to be an identity through which they could express their masculinities. For Simon, the lesbian “community” appeared to offer him the opportunity to be himself and constituted a space through which, in the guise of a butch lesbian, his masculinity could be accepted. Russell expressed a similar experience:

. . . it gave me a legitimate excuse for being butch, you know, 'cos people expect dykes, like sort of dungarees and really heavy boots and funny hair and I fitted that so I thought, this is me, this is my little niche in a way.

Although Martin's experience was somewhat different, as he had identified as bisexual rather than lesbian and had later come to identify himself as a gay man, he also found that lesbian relationships allowed him to more completely realise his masculinity:

. . . when I was dating women, I felt free to finally express my masculinity for the first time after so many years of subconsciously toning it down for the benefit of straight male partners.

Martin considered that the short period during which he had had relationships with women was critical to his recognition of himself as transsexual.

As in Devor's study (1997), common to most of the FTMs' experiences of these relationships was a developing perception of themselves as misfits in a lesbian category/context. However, such perceptions cut across a variety of lesbian lifestyles and subcultures, including social circles of lesbian feminists, non-feminist lesbians, drag-kings, and S/M leather dykes, showing that the reasons for this were more diverse than simply a rejection of the woman-centredness characterised by Devor as specific to lesbian feminism. Nigel hated his female body and could not bear for it to be touched. Carl felt himself within a group of lesbians to be: *some kind of trusted foreigner who was socially mannered to fit the situation without causing too much distress around [him]*. He had been involved in the “*dyke leather community*” and along with others, had “*played in*

the scene as a 'boy.'" However, he had recognised his difference from the other lesbian "boys" through his awareness that for him "*it wasn't just play,*" and that unlike the others, he really desired to have male genitalia. Lee, who had not self-identified as lesbian, had felt uncomfortable with the sexual and social dynamics of his relationships with women. Whilst he had been expected to take the masculine role within his relationships, he felt that his masculine behaviours were *compromised so as to fit the expectations of a butch*. Unlike Simon and Russell, he had not felt at any time that he could express himself within a lesbian role, feeling it to be *as alien to his self-perception as a female role would have been*.

Both Simon and Russell, however, reported that eventually their masculinities could not be expressed or contained in a butch identity. Both had felt that there was a basic "woman centeredness" underneath the masculinities of most butch lesbians that they could not relate to. Ray initially thought that, as he was a "woman" and desired women, then "*logically*" he should be a lesbian. However, once he became involved in lesbian relationships he began to recognise that his *psyche was more male than other lesbians*, and that their *woman centeredness* was something that he *could not share*. Each of the participants had concluded that as they did not feel themselves to be either a heterosexual or lesbian woman, then they must be a man.

For all apart from Ian, who reported that all of his partners had accepted him as male, it was during their relationships and/or friendships with lesbians that they had begun to fully recognise their transsexuality. Whilst initially, for most a lesbian identity/position had provided a place through which their "difference" in sexuality from heterosexual women could be articulated, it also recontextualised their experiences, allowing a process of further differentiation between themselves and lesbians through the issue of "womanhood." For the most part, the FTMs' recognition of their "difference" was not so much based within a certain and preexisting knowledge that they were really male, but rather, through their awareness of what they were not: women. Seen against their own complex gendered positioning, apart from being attracted to other women, lesbians were seen to be unproblematically "women" and were thus reinscribed by the FTMs under the terms of essentialism and

conventional heterosexualised gender. As Nigel's remark demonstrates:

FTMs and lesbians are as different as men and women. As an FTM I know that my thought processes have been and are different from most women. I approach things differently. I am not as emotional about things, I am more logical. Lesbians are women, the only difference is that they enjoy the company of other women. They enjoy the softness, closeness that one woman can bring to another.

The Lesbians: Masculinity and Sexual Practices

As we have seen, in childhood and adolescence the lesbians had, in fact, been problematically "women" in that they did not fit into the category "woman" as understood within the terms of heterosexualised gender. For all, this disjuncture had continued into their adulthood, and as the FTMs had once considered, being a lesbian constituted an identity through which they could articulate their "difference" in sexuality from heterosexual women and express their masculinities. Each of the lesbians considered that their masculinity cut across all areas of their lives, and was expressed primarily through forms of dress, demeanour, and in their sexual relationships. However, none of the lesbians considered that through their masculinities they were emulating men, nor that their masculinity indicated that they should be a man. Whilst in their adulthood, Lynne, Natalie, Anne, and Ruth had often been mistaken for men or young boys in public places. This was seen to be a result of other people's *rigid gender values* rather than suggestive of anything "wrong" with them, as they had felt in their childhood. As Natalie explained: *Because they associate masculine things with men, then they think I'm a man and I just sort of think, well, you've got to fit into discrete categories, there's no shades of grey . . .* For them, the unrealistic *discrete categories* had obscured the *shades of grey*, the "third option," in which they considered themselves to be located.

Further *discrete categories* through which the lesbians negotiated their masculinities and lesbian identities were "heterosexual" and "lesbian" sexual practices. All were familiar with the ways in which some sexual practices between lesbians, such as the use of dildos, had

been interpreted by some lesbian feminists as imitating heterosexual sex (see, e.g., Jeffreys, 1994). However, none agreed with this interpretation. Four lesbians stated that they regularly used dildos in their sexual activities with their partners. Two reported that they did not use them out of personal preference, but did not consider themselves to be against their use. For a long time, Susan and Carol had shied away from using dildos as they had at one time associated them with *wanting to be a man*, although at the time of the interview both had ceased to make this association and had begun to integrate them into their sexual activities. Their change in attitude was primarily due to their increasing visibility and acceptability within lesbian "culture," evidenced in lesbian magazines and other media. Neither Carol or Susan used them with a harness that straps the dildo to the body, although this was not a matter of choice but of circumstance: Susan could not afford one, and Carol could not find one to fit. Both considered that by not wearing a harness they were, in fact, unable to mirror heterosexual penetrative sex, regarding the use of dildos as a specifically lesbian sexual activity and experiencing their use as somehow expressive of their "masculinity." As Susan stated:

I didn't want to be a man but I did have a sort of sexual appetite, a sexual aggression and wanting to, you know, express myself in that way. I've accepted that aspect of myself as a woman, my masculinity, you know.

Anne and Ruth, however, considered their use of dildos to be a conscious act through which they could play with a male gender role. Both used a dildo with a harness, and although they did not feel themselves to be men, they reported that they did experience pleasure from being like men. Ruth, for example, stated that being *like a man* in her sexual practice was accompanied by the fantasy of being one because:

... it's really odd using a dildo because you can't feel it and sometimes ... I do sort of acknowledge that I'd quite like to have a penis just for twenty four hours to see what it was like ... I'd quite like to do it, go out and shag lots of women.

Anne had similar fantasies and, like Ruth, she bemoaned the lack of physical sensation. For Anne, sexual pleasure in wearing the dildo

was derived from within the sexual dynamic created with her partner, from the pleasure she gave to her partner and the way in which this enhanced Anne's feeling of masculinity:

When I wear my dildo and harness, I feel like it is part of me, it belongs on my body, if you know what I mean. Wearing it makes me feel different from usual, but not really different from myself ... when I fuck my girlfriend I can really feel my masculinity, I feel sort of male, but not like a man, more like a boy, maybe that's because as the dildo isn't really part of my body it can feel awkward, you can't feel it so you don't know what you're doing and it gives you a feeling of being novice-like ...

For Anne, feeling *sort of male, but not like a man, more like a boy* and *novice-like* was not, however, about wanting to be a man as for her *having sex with a woman with a dildo [was] a totally different experience*. For Anne and Ruth, the impermanence of the dildo and the absence of "real" sensation whilst wearing it constituted a significant difference between themselves and men: whereas they could be *like* men they could not *be* men. The dildo symbolised the *lack* of being a man and concomitantly the failure of heterosexual sex, rather than enabling their signification. Thus, they were able to enact a form of masculinity within their sexual practices whilst simultaneously retaining a sense of female identification. Like Carol and Susan, Anne and Ruth considered their sexual activities as specifically lesbian, involving their specifically lesbian form of masculinity. As in the case of the FTMs the lesbians similarly employed the terms of conventional heterosexualised gender to assert their difference. Through this "being a man" was seen against their own complex gendered location as unproblematic, insofar as in order to be a man one must have a penis. It is this, I suggest, which facilitates the process of differentiation from lesbians by FTMs, in that "woman identification" can be inferred from the lesbian rejection of an association with maleness.

The FTMs: Sexual Practices and Being a Man

The idea that "being a man" required having a penis was, however, strongly contested by the FTMs. None had undergone surgery to

acquire a penis and, although all reported that they would undergo this surgery if the cost was reduced and the techniques were improved, none considered that being without a penis made them “any less of a man.” For the most part, being without a penis was experienced as generally unproblematic, as most social circumstances did not require the exposure of the genitals. Thus, in their presentation as men, having a penis was assumed rather than questioned.⁵ However, this was not the case within their sexual relationships, which constituted contexts wherein the absence of a penis could not be disguised.

Out of the 12 FTMs, 6 volunteered information about their personal, sexual activities and how these had affected their own and others’ perceptions of them as men. All reported that the lack of a penis did not make them feel, or appear to their sexual partners, as any less male than genetic males and that during their sexual practices, their genitalia did not present a problem to either their partners or themselves. All six had experienced sexual relationships with women prior to deciding on transition, and four stated that they continued to engage in the same sexual activities as previously although now, as men, these activities were *experienced differently*. This difference was attributed to the fact that, as heterosexual men, they appropriated a dildo as an extension of their *own penis*. As Richard, who always wore a dildo during his sexual activities with his partner explained:

... the dildo is merely an extension of my own penis and by focusing my energy on that area of my body I am able to feel what it feels during intercourse. I also translate what my hands and fingers have felt to my penis and that heightens the experience. I am quite orgasmic using dildos—both for oral sex (blow jobs) and intercourse.

In contrast to the lesbians Ruth and Anne, Richard was able to experience physical sensation through his dildo, and considered the dildo as necessary for both his own and his partner’s perception of him *as a man*. He considered his sexual activities to be nothing other than *heterosexual sex*.

However, Pete, on the other hand, reported that he had experienced a change in both his use of, and feelings about, dildos. Prior to de-

ciding on transition he had often used one, but since then he had always found that, far from enhancing his sense of being a man, it had increasingly made him aware of the penis that he lacks. Unlike Richard, but similar to Ruth and Anne, he experiences no physical sensation whilst wearing it, which for him raised many unwanted emotions. He felt that as a man he should experience fully the sensation that is inherent in penetrative sex and, in his failure to do so, he experienced *an unwanted reminder that I’m not the kind of guy I long to be sexually*. Apart from these emotions, Pete also found a dildo clumsy to use, and felt that it reduced intimacy by creating a *barrier* between himself and his sexual partner. Pete had subsequently gone on to identify as a gay man and reported that his partners had no difficulty in desiring and responding to him as a man and that in his sexual activities he was able not only to use his own genitalia but, through so doing, more fully express his maleness as being of *[him]self*. Similarly, Martin recounted how, as a gay man, the act of vaginal penetration had acquired new meaning for him:

Before my first encounter with a man as a man I was worried that being penetrated might make me feel feminised or remind me of my old life, but it did not, I felt completely male and was related to as a male.

In presenting as a man and attracting male sexual partners, Pete and Martin had redefined their sexual role and gendered status. Vaginal penetration and the incorporation of their own genitalia within this sexual context did not in any way generate a feeling or perception of femininity, demonstrating the ways in which the physical body need not always be of significance. As has been suggested by Judith Halberstam (1994), contexts “. . . and readers of gender fiction, as much as bodies, create sexuality and gender and their transivities. In many situations gender or gendering takes at least two” (p. 220).⁶

The FTMs’ narratives of experience explicitly contradict the view of the lesbians: that to be a man you have to have a penis. For one FTM the use of a dildo enabled heterosexual sex, whilst for the lesbians it signified its impossibility. For yet another FTM, a dildo highlighted his difference from genetic men, though the lack of male genitalia was experi-

enced by two FTMs as unproblematic in the context of homosexual sexual activity. For all of the FTMs, sexual activity was not experienced as a context through which their "being men" would be likely to be called into question, providing that there was a correlation between their sense of self, self presentation and others' perceptions.

CONCLUSION

A comparative analysis of these lesbians' and FTMs' accounts of their experiences of their bodies, gender identifications and sexualities over their life courses show that there were more similarities than differences in their experiences. During childhood, adolescence and puberty every participant understood themselves as failing to fit the conventional expectations of girlhood and early womanhood, which their female bodies both signified and were signifiers of. It was in retrospect, from their current positions of identification, that both the lesbians and FTMs interpreted and claimed this shared past as specifically "lesbian" and specifically "transsexual." Whilst the sexual practices of the both the lesbians and the heterosexual FTMs were also more similar than they were different, the accounts showed how through the particular identifications of lesbian "women" and transsexual "men" their experiences are always and already interpreted as specific to the identities claimed.

In the context of the analysis the similarities across the experiences can thus be seen to bring each categorical definition of identity into a visible crisis, supporting the "queer" view that the categorical boundaries between "butch lesbian" and "FTM" identities are blurred, permeable, and fluid (Halberstam 1994, 1996, 1998; Hale, 1998; Rubin, 1992). However, this is not the way in which the participants *understood* their identities. Each group, locating itself within the category of "lesbian" (female) or "FTM" (male), understood the categories as impervious and their occupation of them as extending or reinforcing the categorical boundaries rather than blurring or negating them. The issue of "specificity" thus arises through this contradiction, but does this necessarily point to the inappropriateness or inadequacy of a "queer" view and, therefore, that discrete and distinctive identities of

"butch lesbian" and "FTM" necessarily remain (Prosser, 1996, 1998, 1999)?

I suggest, from the analysis I have presented, that the answer is no. Specificity can be seen as a product, not of experience, but of *narrative construction*. Each participant's account of their life experience and their understandings of their gender and sexual identity formation relied upon the continuous reinscription of categorical boundaries. The juxtaposition of the lesbian and FTM accounts reveals, therefore, not only clear similarity of experience but an indication of the *processes* involved in this narrative construction of categorical boundaries.

To differentiate themselves and mark the borders of their self-identified categorical location, participants engaged in processes of "othering," accomplished through recourses to essentialism and notions of heterosexualised gender attributed to the "other." Crucially, the "other" invoked was not simply *one another* as is suggested by the discussions concerning a "butch/FTM border" (Halberstam 1994, 1996, 1998; Hale, 1998; Prosser, 1996, 1998, 1999), but other "others" against whom, in different contexts, "difference" and therefore specificity, could be claimed. For the lesbians, the social "other" was heterosexual women and the sexual "other" was heterosexual men, whilst for the FTMs the social and sexual "other" was both heterosexual women and lesbians-as-women. In each case, "specificity" of identity was achieved in relation to an "other" who was seen as unproblematic against their own complex selfhood and identity. Both the lesbian and FTM participants illustrated through their accounts, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990) puts it, that: "The person who *knows* has all the problems of self-hood. The person who is *known* somehow seems not to have a problematic self . . . the self of the other is authentic without a problem" (p. 66: emphasis in original).

ENDNOTES

1. For the discussion on the butch/FTM border see Judith Halberstam (1994, 1996, 1998); Jay Prosser (1996, 1998, 1999); and C. Jacob Hale (1998).
2. My intention is to indicate the potential for further research in this field and, therefore, no claims are being made here regarding generalisability from this small sample.
3. For diagnostic criteria that identify "transsexuality" see the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

4. The popularity of the idea of tom-boyhood as an early expression of lesbian identity is exemplified in the collection by Yamaguchi and Barber (1995), who write: "As tomboys, we were 'other' then; as lesbians, we are 'other' now. Though we were defined as tomboys by what we did, for many of us, what we did turned out to be who we were and who we became, the behavior an expression of identity" (p. 13).
5. Kessler and McKenna (1978) use the term "cultural genitalia" to explain this assumption: "The cultural genital is the one which is assumed to exist and which, it is believed, should be there. . . . Even if the genital is not present in a physical sense, it exists in a cultural sense if the person feels entitled to it and/or is assumed to have it" (p. 154).
6. For a broader discussion on gay FTM experience see Holly Devor (1997) *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society*.

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